

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

DAN FLAVIN

Space and Light

Co-organizer:

Dia:

Main partner:

TERRA
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART

**MUSEO
DE ARTE
MODERNO**
MEDELLIN - COLOMBIA

1 *the diagonal of May 25, 1963*
(to Constantin Brancusi)

1963

Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

180.3 x 177.8 x 11.4 cm installed

Dia Art Foundation

Flavin's first use of fluorescent light alone, *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, is dedicated to the Romanian sculptor and his work, as a nod to sculptural space and his *Endless Column* which, as with minimalist works, relied on potential infinite repetition to achieve its full meaning. Yet, Flavin's first pure light work also seems to maintain its relationship to his earlier ironic-symbolic constructions through an association between the gold color of its light and gold icons common in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. The "diagonal of personal ecstasy" as Flavin also referred to this work, could be read both as "literally a hot rod" as described by critic Anna C. Chave, a phallic reference no doubt intended by the artist, but also as a reference to the more spiritual meaning of "ecstasy" in Catholic terms, a recurrent notion in Flavin's earlier works instilled by his Catholic upbringing.

2 *the nominal three (to William of Ockham)*

1963

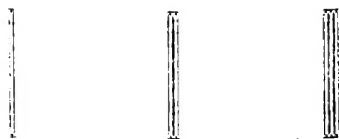
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

243.8 x 10.2 x 12.7 cm; 243.8 x 20.3

x 12.7 cm; 243.8 x 30.5 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation; Partial gift,

Lannan Foundation, 2013



Following his *diagonal*, Flavin continued to experiment with arrangements of single bulbs, as for example with *one (to William of Ockham)*, a vertically oriented tube of cool fluorescent light. However, this work was quickly extended to three sets of tubes—in progressively enlarged groups of one, two and three tubes—, *the nominal three*. The work refers to a theory, outlined by the English Franciscan monk and philosopher, known as Ockham's Razor which states that "Principles (entities) should not be multiplied unnecessarily." Rejecting Thomas Aquinas's doctrines, Ockham argued that reality exists solely in individual things and universals are merely abstract signs. His particular approach to metaphysics, known as nominalism, has special relevance to Flavin's own reduction of the "entities" of his medium to the simple vocabulary of pure fluorescent light.

3

"monument" for V. Tatlin

1974

Fluorescent light and metal
fixtures

304.8 x 40.6 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation



4

"monument" for V. Tatlin

1974

Fluorescent light and metal
fixtures

304.8 x 61.0 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation



Flavin's "*monuments*" for V. Tatlin are predominantly vertical arrangements of cool white fluorescent light, which evoke Tatlin's own unrealized *Monument to the Third International*. Each adheres to a simple system of using at least one but no more than two of each length of commercially available light bulbs. The first eleven monuments were realized in 1964 and expand upon the artists earlier experiments with seriality (as in *the nominal three*) by introducing the concept of permutations, wherein the possible arrangements of a set number of predetermined elements are explored.

5

Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake 2)

1965

Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

Dia Art Foundation



Puerto Rican Light was named for Jeanie Blake who was working at the Green Gallery in New York City in 1964 during the artist's seminal exhibition there and later at Kornblee Gallery, which also exhibited Flavin at one point. Blake remarked that the bright, warm colors reminded her of the light in Puerto Rico. Born in 1933, Flavin was familiar with the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York during the 1950s and 1960s so he named the piece accordingly and dedicated it to Blake.

6

untitled (to Shirley and Jason)

1969

Pink and blue fluorescent light
243.8 x 10.2 x 25.4 cm leaning
Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Louise
and Leonard Riggio, 2005

7

untitled

1969

Pink and green fluorescent light
243.8 x 10.2 x 25.4 cm leaning
Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Louise
and Leonard Riggio, 2005

8

untitled

1969

Pink fluorescent light
243.8 x 10.2 x 25.4 cm leaning
Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Louise
and Leonard Riggio, 2005

9

untitled

1969

Pink and yellow fluorescent light
243.8 x 10.2 x 25.4 cm leaning
Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Louise
and Leonard Riggio, 2005

In the 1960s, many artists associated with Minimalism turned their attention towards the relationship between the work of art and the architectural framework of the gallery. Within the context, the corner became an important site of experimentation, above all for Flavin. Throughout his career he pressed single bulbs into the crevices where two walls meet; framed the right angles of the corner with vertically and horizontally crossing bulbs; and as is the case here, he leaned opposite facing, and chromatically varying tubes of light into this space, creating triangles of light. In each of the works in this group, an 8-foot lamp is balanced against a corner with a smaller lamp of the same or different color facing the corner and producing incredibly simple and beautiful constructions. This strategy of contrasting colors would develop into far more complex works such as his *untitled (Marfa project)* from 1996.

10

untitled (to Thordis and Heiner)

1966-71

Soft white fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

11

untitled (to Janet and Allen)

1966-71

Pink fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

12

untitled (to Christina and Bruno)

1966-71

Yellow fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

13

untitled (to Barbara and Joost)

1966-71

Daylight fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

14

untitled (to Sabine and Holger)

1966-71

Red fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

15

untitled (to Pia and Franz)

1966-71

Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

16 ***untitled (to Karin and Walther)***

1966–71

Blue fluorescent light

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

17 ***untitled (to Heidi and Uwe)***

1966–71

Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

243.8 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm

Dia Art Foundation

The works in this gallery belong to the *European Couples*, a series of constructed "squares across a corner", each in a different color. This was a typical strategy in Flavin's work, in that he frequently replicated a structure with lamps of different colors, creating several unique works from one arrangement. Alternatively, he also kept color constant but varied the format, as in the "*monuments*" for V. Tatlin on display in Gallery A. By throwing light into a corner with differently colored back facing lamps, Flavin painted a subtle field of blended color onto the wall. By simultaneously placing direct light facing out in front of the reflected glow, he further complicated and enhanced the relative effects of juxtaposed colors in light and space. The *European Couples* are part of Flavin's concern and attention for the corner which concretized in different variations, each diverse in color, size and structure, and dedicated to longtime friends and colleagues.

***untitled (to you, Heiner, with
admiration and affection)***

1973

Fluorescent light and metal fixtures

121.9 x 121.9 x 7.6 cm each of 58

Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Louise
and Leonard Riggio, 2005

Akin to his contemporaries, such as Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, and Donald Judd, Flavin shared a reductive formal vocabulary, an emphasis on serial rather than gestural forms, and a focus on the phenomenological presence of objects that must be experienced in real time and space. In 1966 Flavin developed his signature "barriers"—a freestanding series of fixtures that physically block a passageway or a segment of a space with light. These architectural interventions take serial repetition as their point of departure. For example, Flavin's *untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)* (1973) consists of square, fluorescent green units placed side by side at two-foot intervals, until a space is clearly blocked. The dimensions of this site-responsive installation are variable and aim to disrupt the architecture of the exhibition space. Bisecting MAMM's Foundry, the "green barrier" draws attention to the complicated relationship between the optical and physical elements of the artist's practice.

We recommend you walk around the "green barrier" and enter the exhibition through the East door of Gallery A.

DAN FLAVIN

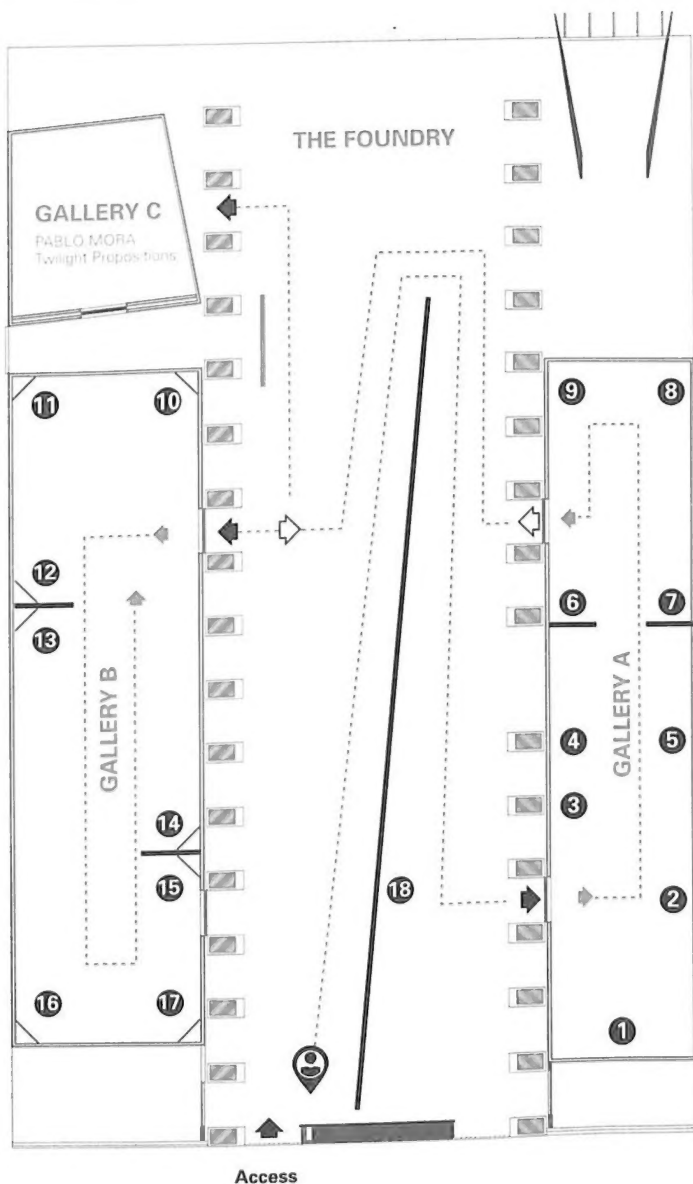
Space and Light

Gallery A, B and The Foundry

Access

Exit

Suggested route



Access

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

DAN FLAVIN

Space and Light

July 17 – October 6, 2019

Gallery A, B and The Foundry

Few artists have been more identified with a particular medium than Dan Flavin (b. 1933, New York City; d. 1996, Riverhead, New York). From 1963 through the remainder of his career, Flavin's work was composed almost entirely of light in the form of commercially available fluorescent tubes in ten colors (blue, green, pink, red, ultraviolet, yellow, and four shades of white) and five shapes (one circular and four straight fixtures of varying lengths). As a pioneering American Minimalist, Flavin aimed to expand his practice beyond the confines of painting and sculpture along with peers like Carl Andre and Donald Judd.

Shifting away from the overly gestural canvases of the Abstract Expressionists that preceded the Minimalists by more than a decade, they embraced a simplified formal vocabulary that emphasized seriality and reduced formal devices. Light, with its few limitations and transformative abilities, represented for Flavin an antidote to gestural painting. He once summed up his practice as "decisions to combine traditions of painting and sculpture in architecture with acts of electric light defining space."¹ The result is a phenomenological experience where the work must be encountered, rather than merely seen, by viewers. Co-organized with

Dia Art Foundation, this exhibition presents eighteen works from its extensive permanent collection of Dan Flavin. Taken together they demonstrate his dedication to melding light and space.

In the early 1960s, Flavin experimented with light alongside painting and sculpture, as exemplified in his series of "icons." Completed between 1961 and 1964, these painted square constructions include various types of incandescent or fluorescent light bulbs, which are attached in various positions to illuminate the works. By 1963 Flavin moved away from the series of icons to focus solely on light. He stated that "the radiant tube and the shadow cast by its pan seemed ironic enough to hold on alone."² Created in 1963, *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)* is Flavin's first singular fluorescent work. Installed at a forty-five-degree angle flush against the wall, this eight-foot-long fluorescent tube emits a yellow glow. As the title suggests, May 25, 1963, not only indicates the work's date of completion, but also marks the beginning of Flavin's career-long commitment to light.

After *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, Flavin recognized the possibilities of incorporating space into his works, realizing that a room could serve as a part of the work rather than simply a space that contains it. In his text " . . . in daylight or cool white" he asserted: "Now the entire spatial container and its parts—wall, floor and ceiling, could support this strip of light but would not restrict its act of light except to enfold it."³ Completed in 1963, *the nominal three (to*

¹ Dan Flavin, " . . . in daylight or cool white," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

William of Ockham) represents Flavin's earliest effort to create a work that considered its surrounding space. The work includes three groups of one, two, and three vertical fluorescent tubes, all six of which emit a bright white light. This progressive grouping of light represents an additive system where more groupings could be included throughout a space, and refers to the work of fourteenth-century English philosopher and Franciscan monk, William of Ockham. In a letter to fellow conceptual artist Mel Bochner, Flavin cited Ockham's Razor, the friar's centuries-old principle for problem solving that is used in math and sciences, noting that "principles (entities) should not be multiplied unnecessarily."⁴ Ockham asserted that to understand any idea or concept, one must look to the smallest number of variables. Flavin embraced these ideals as he continued to develop his own Minimalist practice. The increasing inclusion of space in *the nominal three* represents a bridge toward more intricate works such as his "barrier" pieces.

As Flavin continued to examine the interplay between light and architecture, he noted: "I knew that the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with by planting illusions of real light (electric light) at crucial

junctions in the room's composition."⁵ More specifically, he believed that the corner should not be overlooked. "For example," he observed, "if you press an eight foot fluorescent lamp into the vertical climb of a corner, you can destroy that corner."⁶ From 1966 to 1971, Flavin constructed nine light works dedicated to specific European couples of friends and colleagues. The works in this series are installed in corners; two tubes in each work run parallel from wall to wall and the two remaining tubes connect them, forming a square. The glow of the tubes illuminates the square and emphasizes the depth between the work and its corner. They embody the artist's continued interest in creating objects that considered the interplay between light and architecture, particularly the corner.

Flavin's attention to the corner stems from his exposure to the Russian avant-garde, specifically Camilla Gray's 1962 text, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922*. Gray chronicled not only the material innovations of the Constructivists and Suprematists, but also the failures of a utopian project and intertwined revolutionary ideals with the language of pure abstraction.⁷ Artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich believed that the incorporation of the corner into their work allowed for the elimination of the frame, which further projected their work into real space. Specifically, it was Tatlin's unrealized *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20) that solidified Flavin's interest in the "incomplete." In 1965 he declared: "This dramatic decoration has been founded in the young tradition of a plastic revolution which gripped Russian

⁴ Dan Flavin, quoted in *fluorescent light, etc. from Dan Flavin/lumière fluorescente, etc. par Dan Flavin* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1969), p. 206.

⁵ Flavin, " . . . in daylight or cool white," p. 24.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Govan, "Irony and Light," in *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights, 1961–1996*, ed. Tiffany Bell and Michael Govan (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 40–44.

art only forty years ago. My joy is to try to build from that 'incomplete' experience as I see fit."⁸ Between 1964 and 1990, Flavin produced a series of approximately fifty works titled "monuments" for V. Tatlin. These works are composed almost entirely of cool white fluorescent lights constructed in vertical arrangements of two-, four-, six-, or eight-foot fixtures. The great versatility of these triangular and symmetrical constructions allowed Flavin to create many works.

In 1966 Flavin developed the first of his signature "barriers"—a freestanding series of fixtures that physically disrupt a passageway or segment of space with light. Rather than inhibit an area, light from each barrier serves to define or make otherwise unacknowledged space comprehensible. Completed in 1973, *untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)* is one of Flavin's most complex and intricate light works that considers space. This modular barrier features four-foot square fixtures that are placed side by side at two-foot intervals. The work extends across the length of the room from one wall to the other, or into the spaces until a space is clearly marked. (Flavin dedicated the work to Heiner Friedrich, one of his longtime patrons as well as one of Dia's founders.) The

disruption of space combined with the substantial amount of radiating light draws attention to the complex relationship between the optical and physical confines of architecture.

As a pioneering Minimalist, Flavin embraced fluorescent light as a readymade medium, which allowed him to challenge the conventions of painting and sculpture. *Dan Flavin: Space and Light* is the first presentation of the artist's work in Colombia and includes eighteen *propositions*, as he called them, that loosely follow the emergence of Flavin's fluorescent light-only oeuvre from *the diagonal of may 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)* (1963) to his elaborate "barriers" works and "monuments" to V. Tatlin. These works not only represent key examples from his extensive oeuvre, they also embody his unwavering commitment to consider and incorporate light and space, forming a single transcendent experience.

Dan Flavin: Space and Light is co-organized by the Medellín Museum of Modern Art and Dia Art Foundation and aims at making accessible the work of an indispensable artist of the twentieth century to Colombian audiences as well as to providing the opportunity of experiencing first hand a type of artistic production that is difficult to portray in pictures and whose experience is nearly impossible to describe with words. The exhibition is made possible through a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art, which is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States of America for US-American and international audiences.

⁶Dan Flavin, "The Artists Say," *Art Voices* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1965), p. 72; reprinted in *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights, 1961-1996*, ed. Tiffany Bell and Michael Govan (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 44.

Notes on Minimalism in Colombia

While some contemporary trends in international art (such as Pop art and conceptual art, among others) made significant impact in Colombia, this was not the case with minimalism. Examples of artists whose aesthetic and method of production can be associated with this movement are in fact rather isolated, and occur outside the timeframe of the development of minimalist art in the United States relating to different socio-cultural contexts. This could stem from the fact that Minimalism arose in response to not only a desire to innovate with formal vocabularies (the intention of moving away from the forms and ardent expressivity of gestural abstraction, amongst others), but also to the context of industrial production and material culture of the time.

While in the 1950s and '60s the United States witnessed the intensification of the capitalist economic model, with its system of production and consumption of goods, in Colombia a similar process can only be said to have taken place in the 1970s. It is in this decade that, to some extent, the country reached levels of industrialization that allowed Minimalists to make use of commercially available objects, as in the case of John Castles' and Alberto Uribe's experiments with PVC tubes. This is perhaps one of the reasons for which the Minimalist movement only has a handful of exponents, which as previously noted, often postdate the movement itself.

Despite this, curator Eduardo Serrano identifies Manolo Vellojín as one of the first artists in the minimalist lineage, in particular due to his *Irregular Polygons*. In the prologue of the book *Manolo Vellojín: The Rational Soul of Art*, edited by Davivienda, Serrano states that "the similarity of these paintings to the likewise mixed-format canvas work created at the same time by the U.S. artist Frank Stella is striking. As in the case of Stella, Vellojín's work has a proximity to Minimalism in the sense that it aimed to say more with less, and as in the case of Stella, it involves canvases in the shape of "irregular polygons".⁹

With regards to painters, Rafael Echeverri may come the closest to pure minimalism: his first works were representations of an expressionist nature that blended abstract and figurative elements, but in 1977 he began to focus on geometry on which his later work would be almost entirely founded. Echeverri's work was clearly intended to reduce painting to its essence by using a limited color palette, closing it off within boxes and restricting his formulations to symmetric compositions. Ana Mercedes Hoyos is also prominent in this field and can be categorized as a Minimalist, in particular due to her renowned *Atmospheres* of the 1970s, which laid bare her interest in light, architecture and her constant dialogue with the history of Western art.

Art critic Marta Traba and curator Miguel González¹⁰ also consider Carlos Rojas to be a Minimalist, above all in the early stages of his career, although Serrano does not share their opinion. Traba states that "the Carlos Rojas of the late '60s represents a phase linked to object sculpture and Minimalism, that in the following decade gave way to paintings with horizontal colored bands, never far detached from Andean weavings".¹¹ In sculpture, the experience of Sara Modiano and her *Cenotaphs*—which are in perfect formal harmony with Minimalist proposals and primarily call to mind the sculptor and poet Carl Andre's use of bricks—was noteworthy. However, unlike the Minimalists, Modiano's work has a specific thematic and symbolic reference, inscribing the

idea of a tomb for herself and, by extension, of death in general.

The sculptors who emerged in the 1960s and '70s in Medellín represented the strand that, of all the Colombian artistic experiences of the second half of the 20th century, was most congruent with Minimalism in the country. The sculptor John Castles maintained that these artists, most of which had been trained as architects, entered Minimalism not only through the architecture faculties but also due to the influence of magazines such as *Studio International* and Mies van der Rohe's "less is more". Furthermore, the work's inherent features (an interest in pure materials with a heavy formal load, clear volumes and compositions based on elemental shapes) changed the attitudes towards exhibiting and the placement of artworks. The pedestal was removed, even erased from the exhibition and, by perceiving it as a valid support, a new relationship with the floor was fostered, thus redefining the relationship between work of art, materiality and exhibition space.

Of that group, Ronny Vayda, Germán Botero, Alberto Uribe and John Castles himself are just some of those who sought a renovation of their formal vocabulary, up to date with the developments of the city and society at that time. It should not be forgotten that it was in the 1970s, when industry was consolidated in Colombia and in particular in Medellín, a city that was the ideal setting for production but that also became a subject for thought and art in the region. This was an urban center that survived thanks to waves of immigration and urban development strategies with outlines of public roads, and through different processes of redensification, new imaginaries and industrial materials that allowed this type of sculpture to emerge. Another reason might have been 1982's Agreement 36 (Special Patrimonial Protection Plan), under which construction companies were obliged to set aside 70% of building taxes for the promotion of works of an artistic nature. Most of the sculptures created were in line with the minimalist aesthetic, possibly inspired by similar public sculpture programs in the United States or by the outdoor siting of large-scale and impactful minimalist works, such as those by Richard Serra.

Nonetheless, the most direct references by Colombian artists concerned with the minimalist aesthetic and discourse might be found in recent times, in a country that eventually became familiar with this type of production, due in part to the boost provided by the exhibition of the work of some American Minimalists such as Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly (MAMBO, 1976) and the presence of Carl Andre at the 4th Medellín Art Biennial (1982) following an invitation by Eduardo Serrano. A much larger group of Colombian artists that refer to minimalist practices includes César del Valle and Nicolás Consuegra, who produce works and projects that are based on critical or humorous stances and arise from a wider investigation into modernity, minimalist tenets and the relationship between art and space, among others interests.

⁹ Marcela García and Eduardo Serrano. *Manolo Vellojin*. (Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Gamma, 2018)

¹⁰ <http://institutovision.com/visionarios/miguel-gonzalez/> (Accessed: Julio 2019)

¹¹ Marta Traba. *The Art of Latin America 1900 – 1980*. (New York: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 1994)